Clare's Tonsure: Act of Consecration or Sign of Penance?

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"La 'tonsura' di Chiara: Gesto di consacrazione o segno di penitenza?"

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In the Bull of Clare's canonization (1255) we read that "fleeing from the clamor of the world, she went down to the church in the field and received the sacred tonsure from blessed Francis himself."

The unusual nature of this gesture was pointed out over half a century ago by Paul Sabatier: "The result is such a strong argument that the hagiographers do not seem to notice how Francis was unaware of canon law. He, a simple deacon, took upon himself the right to receive Clare's vows and to give her the tonsure without any novitiate." More recently, Marco Bartoli's careful study took up again the exceptional character of Clare's tonsure, emphasizing that the act took place in a deliberately liturgical context. The question that arises here is whether Francis's action really went beyond his authority, and if the cutting of Clare's hair at the Portiuncula was really a sacred tonsure or not. Or was it rather a gesture of penitence that was looked upon later as a solemn consecration? To find an answer to these questions, let us take a brief historical glance at the meaning of the tonsure of women and the implications of this act.

That the origin of tonsure is not specifically Christian is frequently attested in antiquity. Tonsure belongs to those "rites of passage" which express separation from the world or from a former state, while with their offering or sacrifice they signify a new tie with the divinity.⁴

¹[Bull of Canonization 6, in Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., Clare of Assisi: Early Documents (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 179. This translation, and those from the Legend of St. Clare and the Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare, are all from the same book, used with permission of Paulist Press. — Editor.]

² See Bartoli, "Chiara d'Assisi," in *Bibliotheca Seraphico-Capuccina*, vol. 37, ed. Collegio S. Lorenzo da Brindisi (Rome, 1989), pp. 65–68.

³ Bartoli espresses the perplexity of such a gesture in the following terms: "Francis was not a bishop, to whom normally was reserved the consecration of virgins, and he was not even a priest. And yet he, a mere lay person, took upon himself the right to consecrate Clare to the Lord" ("Chiara d'Assisi," pp. 67–68).

In this regard Lucian of Samosata (to mention an ancient author) reports that the inhabitants of Hierapolis in Syria had a custom, which among the Greeks was found only among the Trenzenes. He writes: "These have a law that virgins and young men cannot approach marriage unless they first cut their hair in honor of Hippolytus. This same custom now prevails in the Holy City. Youths offer their first beard. Little boys, out of devotion, are permitted to grow their hair from birth, and when they reach the age of consecration they cut their hair, and placing it in vessels of silver or gold, they hang it in the temple with an inscription indicating the name of the individual whose hair it is."6 Lucian also recalls that it is the custom in Lebanon and Egypt to shave the head as a sign of mourning for the divinity who has died (Api in Egypt and Adonis in Lebanon): "The women who do not want to shave their heads suffer the following punishment: For one day their beauty is exposed for sale, but only foreigners may purchase it and the price is sacred to Venus."6

In the early Christian world, as well as in Judaism, the custom of cutting women's hair is unknown. In fact, hair is woman's natural ornament (1 Cor. 11: 14–15). Yet as Christians, women are called by Paul to a sober hair style, and more specifically to the wearing of a veil as an expression of belonging to a man (1 Cor 11: 10).

Speaking thus, Paul challenged the practice of the women of Corinth, who—in the name of the Christian freedom he proclaimed—took off their veils. He enjoins that if they are unwilling to cover their heads with a veil, they should also shave their heads (1 Cor 11: 6).

Later Christian tradition does not seem to have regarded the shaved head of a woman as a mark of mockery. Already by the end of the second century, in the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, the latter says to the apostle: "I wish to cut off my hair entirely and follow you wherever you go." This is certainly for ascetic reasons, but also to avoid 'dangers' from men.

⁴ See A. Van Gennep: Os ritos de passagem, trans. from the French (Petropolis: Vozes, 1978), pp. 141–42. Concerning the belonging to one person or a divinity by means of the cutting off of one's hair, see also A. Michel in *DThC*, s.v. "Tonsure." For his part, H. Leclerq observes that the cutting off of hair as a "sign of belonging" was of common use among the people of Egypt. From this it seems to have passed to priests and to monks. See *DACL*, s.v. "Tonsure."

⁵ Lucian of Samosata: "Della dea Siria," in I dialoghi e gli epigrammi, vol. 2 (Genoa: Basilisco, 1988), p. 948.

⁶ Ibid, p. 933

⁷ See P. Termes, in *Encicl. della Bibbia*, s.v "Capello."

⁸See C. Gaucho, ibid., s.v. "Velo."

⁹ "Atti di Paolo," 2, 25, in *Gli apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento: Atti e leggende*, vol. 2, ed. M. Erbetta (Casale M.: Marietti, 1966) p. 263.

While the historicity of these Acts is questionable, it still remains beyond doubt that the practice attested here of Christian women shaving their heads is not unknown. We have a further confirmation in the Acts of Thomas, which date from the middle of the third century. Here it is stated that Migdonia, having been converted by the apostle, appeared before her husband Carisius "with her hair cut, her face scratched, her dress torn, ... and because of Thomas she appeared to be insane."

The persistence of this practice during the fourth century is recorded by the historians Socrates and Sozomen, when speaking of the ascetic movement that arose in Asia Minor owing to the work of Eustatius of Sebaste. Socrates describes Eustatius thus: "Wearing the robe of a philosopher, he ordered his followers to wear a strange garb. He accustomed the women to cut off their hair." Sozomen, for his part, notes how the followers of Eustatius, "some of them under pretext of piety, cut their hair and wore clothing not befitting women, that is, men's clothing." 12

Taking a position against these strange ascetic practices, the Council of Gangra (ca. 340) prescribed in canon 17: "If any women decides, for the service of God, to cut her hair because God asks it of her as an expression of submission, let her be anathema." ¹³

The harshness of this norm is due to the fact that the women in question were already married, and the penitential gesture of cutting their hair could serve to make them less attractive to their husbands or even cause the latter to repudiate them. But this sign, together with the wearing of masculine dress, also served to express the full equality between men and women as upheld by the Eustathian movement. In fact, by giving up her hair, the sign of her submission to man, a woman freed herself from him.

According to the author of *De virginitate* (ca. 370), falsely attributed to Athanasius, ¹⁴ the situation is different for virgins who live in their own homes. They are required to wear "clothing of little value, not colored, ... to have a veil without fringe and of the same color as the dress, to have their hair cut and their head bound by a band of wool." ¹⁵

^{10 &}quot;Atti di Tommaso," IX 114, in Gli apocrifi, p. 356.

¹¹Socrate, "Historia ecclesiastica," II 43, in PG 67, 353a.

 $^{^{12}}$ Sozomen, idem, III 14, in PG 67, 1080b.

¹³ "Acta concilii gangrensis," in Ecclesiae occidentalis monumenta iuris antiquissima, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1902).

¹⁴ See H. Leclerq, DACL, 3098–3100, cited in n. 4 above.

¹⁵ Ps. Athanasius, De virginitate, II, PG, 28, 263.

Jerome confirms the custom of tonsure for the women of Syria and Egypt who lived in monasteries. ¹⁶ His geographic detail is interesting, since this practice, an expression of contempt for the world and also of penitence, does not seem to have been in force everywhere. In fact, Augustine asks certain African nuns living in community not to wear veils so transparent as to reveal the precious hair nets that kept their hair together. He adds: "Let no part of your hair be uncovered or outside, no matter if it is disheveled through neglect or carefully arranged." ¹⁷

Once again in the West, Ambrose tells us that it is required for virgins living in the world that they not cut their hair but wear is soberly and cover it with a veil: "Let modesty, sobriety, and continence be the band for the hair of holy virginity. Thus, girded with the company of virtues and covered with the purple veil of our Lord's blood, let her carry about the mortification of the Lord Jesus in her body. For the better veils are the garments of the virtues, by which sin is covered and innocence is revealed." ¹⁸

The same Ambrose also gives us another piece of valuable information. In speaking of the consecration of virgins, he refers only to the velatio 19 ("taking the veil") in connection with the virgin Susanna, who had had relations with a young man. But among the other acts of penance the bishop required: "You should receive a garment of mourning.... Your hair should be cut off, since on account of vainglory it

¹⁶ Jerome, "Epistula 147," 5, in *PL*, 22, 1199: "In the monasteries of Syria and Egypt it is customary for virgins and widows who, renouncing the world, have dedicated themselves to God and have trampled under foot all worldly delights, to offer their hair to be cut by the mothers of the monasteries. Afterwards they go about not with their heads uncovered contrary to the will of the apostle, but veiled and bound up as well." According to Gaugaud, the fact of having their hair cut on the part of religious of both sexes coincides with a kind of messa in tutela and is required in entering into religious life. See *DS*, s.v "Chevelure."

¹⁷ "Epistula 211" 10, in *Lettere*, vol. 3, ed. L. Carrozzi (Rome: Città Nuova, 1974), p. 520. Also see Augustine, "De sancta virginitate," 34, 34, in *Matrimonio e virginitate*, VII/l, eds. M. Palmieri, V. Tirulli, and N. Cipriani (Rome: Città Nuova, 1978), p. 124.

¹⁸ Ambrose, De institutione virginis, 109, in PL, 16. See also idem, 108, in PL, 16, 346 of his canticle. Also, Jerome in Epistula 22 13 (CSEL 54, 161) to Eustochium speaks of these virgins living in the world, and he criticizes them because, among other things, they wear part of their mantle (the cap) loosened so that their hair may fall on their shoulders. This is an evident sign that tonsure is not practiced by them. Still elsewhere in the same Letter 22 (27, 184) Jerome recalls how these, for mere ostentation, "ashamed of being born women, dress as men, shorten their hair, and impudently put on the appearance of eunuchs."

¹⁹ In Ambrose, "De lapsu virginis consecratae," V, in *PL* 16, 388 we read: "Do you not remember that holy day, Easter, on which you offered yourself to be veiled at the altar of God?... After much praise was given about your chastity on that day of your consecration, you wre covered with a holy veil." See also "De institutione virginis," 107, in *PL*, 16, 346.

provides an occasion for dissipation."²⁰ Thus the *velatio* or consecration does not see the act of cutting the hair as any different from entry into the Order of Penitents, where this act takes on the character of mortification. In fact, even in subsequent ages entrance into the penitent state, which ordinarily took place at the beginning of Lent, was marked by the imposition of sackcloth and ashes together with tonsure.²¹

We know also of a form of tonsure for the sick who requested penance. The *Liber ordinum* of the Visigoth and Mozarabic Church says with regard to them: "If anyone who is sick desires to do penance, the priest shall come in and first cut his hair. Then he receives Communion. After this, he clothes him in sackcloth, makes a cross with ashes and says this response."

The link between tonsure and penance is found also in connection with heretics, who once they have abjured their error, are tonsured in poenitentiam ("as a sign of penance"). Significant in this regard is the episode related in the Chronica Albrici monachi. Speaking of the year 1233, it recorded that Conrad of Marburg trusted too much in a woman who through vengeance accused her relatives and friends: "Through her testimony she drove many innocent people to the flames or to being shorn, while Master Conrad executed swift judgment."²³

²⁰ "De lapsu virginis consecratae," 8, PL 16, 394.

²¹ See E. Amann, in DTRC, s.v. "Pénitence." See also B. Poschmann, "Busse und Letzte Ölung," in Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Freiburg: Herder, 1951), p. 46. In note 18, on the subject of penitents, Poschmann cites canon 15 of the Council of Agde (506), wich states: "Si autem comas non deposuerint aut vestimenta mutaverint, abiiciantur." It adds, however, that tonsure as an act of penitence is sometimes required of men only, while of women is only required the change of dress. See M. Ferotin: "Le 'Liber Ordinum' en usage dans l'Eglise visigothique et mozarabe d'Espagne du cinquième au douzième siècle," in Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica, eds. F. Cabrol and H. Leclerq (Paris, 1904), p. 88.

²²M. Ferotin, "Ordo penitentiae 30," in *Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica*, pp. 87–88. See D.C. Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, who speaks of "Poenitentes" (5, 322) and points out that "ex hoc poenitentium ritu, quod scilicet comas deponere, mutare vestimenta, caelibem vitam agere cogerentur, profecta est consuetudo, ut infirmi monasticum habitum peterent." We already find traces of this penitence *in extremis* in the *Historia francorum* of Gregory of Tours, who refers to those who "subito lateris dolore detentus caput totondit atque poenitentiam accipiens spiritu exhalavit" (6 28, in *PL*, 72 395). For more on this subject see E. Amann, in *DTC*, s.v. "Pénitence."

²³Chronica Albrici monachi trium fontium, a monacho novi monasterii hoiensis interpolata, in Monumenta Germaniae Historica, vol. 23, p. 931. In this extract it is related that some, fearing the accusation of heresy, "dabant pretia tonsoratis, ut docerent modum evadendi, et facta est confusio a saeculis inaudita" (p. 932). The following testimony is also significant: "Anno Domini MCCXXXXI orta est persecutio haereticorum ... (talis ut) nec defendendi locus daretur ... sed incontinenti oportebat eum (quisquis capiebatur) vel reum se confiteri et in poenitentiam recalvari, vel crimen negare et cremari.... Quin etiam in multis deprehensum est, quod haeretici aliquos de suis subornaverunt, qui se tamquam in poenitentiam tonsurari permiserunt, et sic catholicos

Finally, we may also take note of a tonsure that was given "as a sign of offering or conversion," thus describing the state of one who is an oblate in a monastery.²⁴

The testimonies brought together thus far leave no doubt as to the penitential character of cutting one's hair as an external expression of a different way of life. There are many additional confirmations that could be gathered from the thirteenth century alone. One that comes to mind is the life of Blessed Marie d'Oignie, written by Cardinal Jacques de Vitry, which clearly mentions not only the renunciation of luxurious garments but also one's own hair.²⁵

Regarding the Beguines, we know of the rebuke stirred up by the Dominicans against William of Saint Amour, who was accused of having stated: "Women living in the world who change their manner of dress on account of religion sin gravely. Those who give up their hair while living in the world, thinking that they are doing so on account of religion, commit sin. Both groups are to be excommunicated." ²⁶

No less interesting is the episode written in the *Relatio* of the papal commissaries on the life and death of Elizabeth of Thuringia, where we read of a young girl, who for a fault attributed to her had her hair cut off. On being asked by Elizabeth whether she understood the concept of "proposal of a better life," she replied that unless the beauty of her hair prevented her, she would serve the Lord for a long time in the habit of religion. The compiler of the account adds that the young girl, having taken the habit of religious life, was forever after received by Elizabeth for service in the hospital: "Even to this day she is serving in the hospital at Marburg, and we have seen her beautifully adorned hair."

accusaverunt" (Gesta Archiepiscoporum Trevi, in Marten., vol. 4, Amplissima collectio, col. 243, quoted by D.C. Du Cange in Glossarium, vol. 6, p. 607, cited in n. 22 above).

²⁴ Du Cange reports a testimony of 1308 in which a husband and wife chose to become oblates in the same monastery and there, before some men called in as witnesses, and before the nuns, both were shorn of their hair by the abbess: "Raynaldus Scarparolus ... et Maria uxor ipsius Raynaldi, volentes se a seculo ad Dominum convertere, et in dicto monasterio ipsi Deo servire, bona sua et spontanea voluntate obtulerunt se et bona sua dicto monasterio S. Mariae monialium de Palacziolo, et professionem in manibus olim domnae Mendulae, quae tunc erat abbatissa ipsius monasterii, fecerunt, et in signum oblationis et conversionis eorum, tonsuram, de manibus ipsius abbatissae Mendulae receperunt, praesentibus ibidem bonis hominibus vocatis pro testibus, et sororibus suis monialibus ipsius monasterii" (Charta ann. 1308, vol. 2, Hist. Cassin., p. 624, col. 1, quoted by Du Cange, in Glossarium, vol. 6, p. 606, cited in n. 22 above).

²⁵ See Jacques de Vitry, Vita B. Mariae Oigniacensis, vol. 1, in Acta sanctorum, June 5 (Paris, 1867), p. 550.

²⁶ The quoted text is in "Casus et articuli, super quibu

^{27 &}quot;Relazione del commissari papali Corrado da Hildesheim e Hermann de Georgenthal sulla vita e morte di Elisabetta di Turingia-Marburg 1235," in A. Huyskens: Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der hl. Elisabet Landgräfin von Thüringen (Marburg,

In the region of Italy there are two significant episodes that refer to Filippa Mareri and Margherita Colonna respectively. Regarding the former, Luke Wadding says that after living an almost eremitic life in her own home, in order to escape the opposition of her brother who wanted to marry her off, "having cut her hair and put on decent clothing, she fled secretly to the mountains with a few women and some others who knew of her proposal." In this case it was Filippa herself, who once she had fled from the castle and found refuge in the holy place called "Sanctus Nicolaus de gripta," cut off her hair and clothed herself in penitential garb.

The episode of Margherita Colonna is quite similar, though it took place several decades later. In the *Vita prima*, written by Brother John between 1281 and 1285, we read: "Laying aside her secular clothes [Margherita] ... clothed herself in a cheap garment.... She cut the hair by which she, being beautiful, had greatly defiled herself. The tonsure took place in this way. Kneeling down she began to sing with great devotion and in a loud voice the hymn to the Virgin, *Ave Maris Stella*. When she came to the verse 'Show yourself a mother', using the scissors she was holding, she cut off her hair and threw it down the drain as a sign of greater disdain and self-contempt."²⁹

From the two episodes already mentioned, one fact seems clear: The putting on of a different mode of dress and the tonsure were not conferred by ecclesiastical authority but by the persons themselves, and were done in a sacred place. It was a question, then, of acts that were recognized by the church. These acts, quite apart from the one who performed them, freed a person from the authority of the family and indicated a passage into a new life. They were personal choices that derived their official character from their external elements and that demanded guardianship on the part of the church and respect from the laity. Indeed, tonsure and the taking of the habit of penance signified entrance into the category of "servants of God" — penitents who were granted certain privileges by ecclesiastical authority, espe-

^{1908),} pp. 132-33.

²⁸ The text of Luke Wadding just quoted concludes by revealing that Filippa, together with her companions, having arrived "ad montana Marerii ... se sociasque divinae protection! commisit, vitam doctura eremiticam, donec Deus quid eam facere vellet edoceret" (Annales Minorum, vol 2, 417 X [1931]: 134).

²⁹ "Vita prima b. Margaritae Columnae auctore Joanne Columna eiusdem fratre Germano, Senatore Urbis VI," in L. Oliger: B. Margherita Colonna (Rome: Lateranum, 1935), p. 134.

³⁰ See Edith Pásztor, "Filippa Mareri e Chiara d'Assisi," in S. Filippa Mareri e il monastero di Borgo S. Pietro nella storia del Circolano (Acts) (Rome, 1989), p. 67.

cially protection against possible harassment from family or civil authorities.31

The tonsure, then, was understood not only as a sign of penance and flight from the world, but also as a rite of initiation and the placing of oneself under the protection of the church. It is not surprising that by a kind of common consensus it was already imposed in monasteries of women during the High Middle Ages. 32 Yet it was not part of the ancient ceremonial for the consecration of a virgin, which instead included the vesting with a blessed habit and the conferring of the veil, ring, and crown.33

From this set of elements we can now pass to a consideration of the significance of Clare's tonsure by Francis. The episode of the cutting of her hair, as is evident from the following synoptic table, appears with various nuances in the Acts of the Process of Canonization, 34 the Bull of Canonization, 35 and the Legend of St. Clare. 36

Sister Beatrice's Testimony

Hugolino's Testimony

Lord Ranieri's Testimony

called the Portiuncula, and Mary of the Portiuncula. then sent her to the church of San Paolo della Abbadesse.

Then St. Francis gave her the He had heard that St. Fran- As quickly as possible, she tonsure before the altar in the cis himself gave her the ton- had her hair cut by St. church of the Virgin Mary, sure in the Church of St. Francis.

John de Ventura's Testimony

Bull of Canonization

Legend of St. Clare

Francis in the Church of St. clamor of the world, she of the Portiuncula, leaving Mary of the Portiuncula or in went down to the church in behind her home, city, and the Church of San Paolo.

So she was tonsured by St. Then, fleeing from the And so she ran to St. Mary

the field, and, after receiv- relatives. There the brothing the sacred tonsure from ers, who were observing sa-

³¹See G.G. Meerssemann, Pénitents ruraux communautaires en Italie au XII siècle, RHE 49, 1 (1954): 353, 364.

 $^{^{32}}$ A witness in this sense is referred to in the entrance into religion of St. Gertrude (d. 659). When she presented herself at the monastery of Nivelle, "mater ... ferrum tonsoris arripuit et capillos sanctae puellae ad instar coronae subscisit" (Vita Gertrudis, 2d ed. Krusch, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptorum, vol. 2, p. 456, quoted by L. Gaugaud in DS, s.v. "Chevelure").

³³ See R. Metz: "Le nouveau rituel de consécration des vierges sa place dans l'histoire," in La maison Dieu 110 (1972): 101.

³⁴ In the Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare it is expressly recalled by Sora Beatrice de Messere Pavarone de Assisi (XII 4); by Hugolino de Pietro Girardone, knight of Assisi (XVI 6); by Messere Ranieri de Bernardo de Assisi (XVIII 3); and by John de Ventura de Assisi (XX 6). See also the testimony of Madonna Bona del Guelfuccio de Assisi (XIII 5), which also points out the cutting of Clare's hair but does not add anything

³⁵ In Armstrong, Clare of Assisi, p. 179, no. 6.

³⁶ In ibid., p. 196, no. 8.

the blessed Francis himself, cred vigils before the little she went to another altar of God, received the [church]. virgin Clare with torches.

altar of God, received the virgin Clare with torches. There, immediately after rejecting the filth of Babylon, she gave the world 'a bill of divorce'. There, her hair shorn by the hands of the brothers, she put aside every kind of fine dress.... After she received the insignia of holy penance before the altar of the Blessed Virgin, and, as if before the throne of this Virgin, the humble servant was married to Christ, St. Francis immediately led her to the Church of San Paolo to remain there until the Most High would provide another place.

In the first place it must be noted that the episode of the tonsure (1212) took place forty-one years before the testimony given for the process of canonization. In their testimony the witnesses limited themselves to recalling the event, with small discrepancies. The first observes that the tonsure took place before the altar; the third stresses the haste of the saint; the fourth is unsure of the place where it happened. Even the text of the Bull is sparing in its details, although its mention of "sacred tonsure" lends solemnity to Francis's act. By contrast, the Legend offers different elements along with a rereading of the event.³⁷ At the beginning of the episode, the narrator mentions the presence of Francis, who having counseled Clare about her conversion, commands her to "to turn her worldly joy into mourning the Lord's passion." In effect, the episode of the cutting off of her hair takes place during the night between Palm Sunday and Monday of Holy Week, at a time of penitence and not in a festive atmosphere. Celano himself in the Legend does not fail to point this out, showing how Clare, on the occasion of the tonsure and the renunciation of her various ornaments, received the insignia of holy penance.38

³⁷ Regarding the cutting of hair, Bartoli notes that in the *Legenda* "perhaps Thomas of Celano avoided emphasizing the tonsure performed by Francis that evening of Palm Sunday just because he was aware of the absolute exception of such an act" ("Chiara d'Assisi," p. 67, cited in n. 3 above). I personally believe that Thomas would have had a certain discomfort in using the word 'tonsure' from the moment that such an expression, a few months before, had already been used by the same Pope Alexander IV in the *Bull of Canonization*.

It is worth looking into the time and context in which the rite took place. The *Legend* specifies that the brothers were celebrating *Sacras excubias*, which we can take to mean the Office of Vigils, the Night Office, or Matins. Now if we go back to the reading then in use, which we find in the Breviary of St. Francis (used by the saint between 1223 and 1226 but dating prior to that),³⁹ we find a commentary by Augustine on the Gospel of the day (John 12: 1–11). It tells how Mary "took a pound of ointment, genuine nard of great value, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and with her hair wiped His feet. And the house was filled with the odor of the ointment" (John 12: 3).⁴⁰

Beginning from the Gospel text, Augustine declares: "Which of you wishes to be a faithful soul? Join Mary in anointing the feet of Jesus with precious ointment.... Anoint the feet of Jesus; that is, follow in the Lord's footsteps by living virtuously. Dry His feet with your hair. If you have surplus goods, give them to the poor, and you will have dried the Lord's feet with your hair; for hair would seem to be nonessential to the body but necessary for the Lord's feet."

There is a striking temporal coincidence between the reading of this passage and the profession of penitence expressed in Clare's giving up of her hair, among other things. Is this coincidence accidental or deliberate? It is hard to say, but to my way of thinking the details that show how everything was arranged in advance favor the hypothesis that the "sacred vigils" of Monday of Holy Week are a more apt liturgical premise to Clare's "beginning to do penance." For Clare, for Francis,

 $^{^{38}}$ LegCl 8, 14. For her part, Clare, in the Rule VI, as well as in the Testament (24—25), doesn't emphasize tonsure, but presents her new life as a "conversion" (Test 25) and as a "doing penance" (RCl VI l; Test 24).

³⁹See G. Abate: "Il primitivo breviario francescano," in *Miscellanea franciscana* 60 (1960): 151.

⁴⁰The text of Augustine read on the evening of Monday of Holy Week was taken from Commento al Vangelo di Giovanni, trattato 50, 5–10. See Opere di Sant'Agostino: Commento al Vangelo e alla prima epistola di San Giovanni, ed. A. Vita and E. Gandolfo (Rome: Città Nuova, 1968), 1002–8.

⁴¹ Thid 6 1002

⁴² The Legenda 7 states clearly that on a certain day before Palm Sunday, Clare betook herself to Francis, "asking about her conversion and how it should be carried out. The father Francis told her that on the day of the feast, she should go, dressed and adorned ... and on the following night she should turn her worldly joy into mourning the Lord's passion." The same episode, of the bishop on Palm Sunday descending from the altar and giving her the palm, might be understood as a tacit consent on what might have been performed the following evening. Moreover, it is hard to think that Francis or Clare herself would not have informed the bishop beforehand of an act that was testined to cause such a fuss. Likewise, Clare's going to the monastery of the Benedictines of St. Paul, which took place immediately after the celebration at the Portiuncula ("St. Francis immediately led her to the Church of San Polo" [v. 8]) could not have been affirmed if the nuns at S. Paul's had not been forwarned of Clare's act and of the consequences to which

and for the witnesses, the connection between the readings of Matins and what they were doing then could not have been lost.

The author of the Legend, unlike the other narrators of the episode, observes that it was not Francis, but the brothers, who cut off Clare's hair ("her hair shorn by the hands of the brothers").43 The failure to mention Francis is significant and most likely is due to Celano's rereading of the episode. In fact, from the Legend we also learn that, shortly before, the brothers welcomed Clare with torches.44 Therefore, there is on the part of the small community of penitents an explicit and joyful agreement to accept the young girl. Therefore, the cutting of her hair, more than signifying an act of authority of Francis over Clare - precisely because it is not attributed to him but to the group of brothers would express their positive wish to consider Clare as one of their own and the involvement of them all in this choice. This is an act that sanctions the girl's entrance into the army of the poor or the Order of Penitents, whose lowly state she had assumed. Such an action is not in accord with her noble origins, nor is there any similar example in the region.45

In short, this is not an episode restricted to Francis and Clare, but rather an act in which the first community is not only spectator but also protagonist.

The nuptial context into which Celano inserts the scene, with references to Mary as mother and virgin, recalls the ceremony of the consecration of virgins, which is inspired by the wedding ceremony. But here we grasp the editor's desire to transform the event by rereading it in nuptial terms. At any rate, precisely because it was a penitential season and juridically impossible for the brothers to consecrate a virgin, the event was basically an act of giving and receiving the insignia of holy penance.

she would have exposed herself.

⁴³ LegCl 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9: "[Her relatives] tried to persuade her to give up such a worthless deed that was unbecoming to her class and without precedence in her family."

⁴⁶See Metz, "Le nouveau rituel," p. 106. The 'matrimonial' reading of this episode is hinted at even from the *Bull of Canonization* 19, which presents Clare as the "spouse of the King and Lord of heaven," and from the *Mirror of Perfection* 84, which recalls how "Here for the tonsure of her golden tresses came the sweet virgin Clare, the spouse of Jesus, casting behind her all the pomps and pleasures loved by the worldly" [trans. from *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, ed. Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p. 1217, used by permission of Franciscan Herald press — Editor].

⁴⁷ As a result it is clear that the liturgical time adapted for the consecration of a virgin could not have been Passion Week.

Nevertheless it remains true that this moment was seen as a total giving of oneself to the service of Christ, or as entrance into religious life.⁴⁹ The sign of this choice was the shaved head,⁵⁰ which placed Clare juridically under the protection of the Church.

Consequently this will be the "document" that she, clinging to the altar cloths, will show her relatives when they arrive at San Paolo with the intention of taking her back to Assisi. In the canonization process, Lord Ranieri de Bernardo of Assisi testifies: "As quickly as possible, she had her hair cut by St. Francis. When her relatives wanted to take her from San Paolo and bring her back to Assisi, they could in no way persuade her, because she did not want to go. She showed them her tonsured head and so they let her stay." Tonsure, a sign of penitence, became her defense. It seems that for her protection, the intervention of the bishop was not needed, nor did the nuns of San Paolo need to defend their right to give asylum. It was sufficient for Clare to confront her relatives with the fait accompli of her shorn head and her consequent membership in the Order of Penitents.

⁴⁸ The nuptial terminology used by Celano is present in all of the *Legenda*: "[The father Francis] whispered in her ears of a sweet esposal with Christ, persuading her to preserve the pearl of her virginal purity for that blessed Spouse Whom Love made man (v. 5)... The virgin did not withold her consent for very long, because of the insistent most holy father and his role as a skillful agent of the most faithful Groom ... for Whose love she would begin to yearn for heavenly nuptials.... She already proposed to be ignorant of the transgression of the marriage bed ... and strove by her virtue to be worthy of marriage with the great King (v. 6). She gave herself 'a bill of divorce' ... and, as if before the throne of this Virgin [Mary], the humble srvant was married to Christ" (v. 8).

⁴⁹ In the *Legenda*, Clare's tonsured head is associated with the service of Christ: "She bared her tonsured head, maintaining that she would in no way be torn away from the service of Christ" (v. 9).

⁵⁰ In the testimony offered at the process of canonization, Sister Benvenuta da Peroscia recalls how "she [herself] etered religion in that same as year as [Lady Clare] did. She knew [Clare] had entered on Holy Monday, and, she, the witness, entered afterwards in the month of September" (*Proc* II 1). See also the testimony of Hugolino de Pietro di Girardone de Assisi (idem, XVI 6).

⁵¹ In the Bull of Canonization 6 we read: "When her relations endeavored to bring her back, she immediately took hold of the altar and its cloths, uncovered her shorn head and strongly and resolutely resisted her relatives in this way. She could not permit herself to be separated from God's service because she was already joined to Him with her whole mind."

⁵² Proc XVIII 3.

⁵³ See Bartoli, "Chiara d'Assisi," p. 74, cited in n. 3 above.

⁵⁴ Penitents during the thirteenth century, inasmuch as they were ecclesiastical people, would be under the protection of the church. That fact is mentioned by G.G. Meersemann, who recalls a pontifical document of December 11, 1221, in which the bishop of Rimini was urged to perform his duty to defend certain privileges of the penitents — therefore much more remote — against the recent vexations of the civil authority. See *Pénitents ruraux communautaires*, p. 364, cited in n. 31 above.

An indirect confirmation of what we have been saying is furnished by what happened in the case of Clare's sister Agnes. Celano tells how the latter, sixteen days after Clare's conversion (April 3/4, 1212) went to join Clare, who by then had gone to the Church of San Angelo di Panzo, where it seems she stayed with a group of women leading a life of penance.⁵⁵

In the case of Agnes too, her relatives did all they could to bring her back home, even resorting to violence. We read in the *Legend* that a knight in the group "tried to drag her away by her hair," and a little later that the thugs were "strewing the path with the hair they had torn out." Ferhaps we should see in this twofold mention of hair the power of intervention the family exercised over Agnes. But tonsure removed all possibility of power over her. And in fact, the attempt to take her back to Assisi having failed, "Francis cut off her hair with his own hand," thus definitively withdrawing her from the power of her relatives.

The quasi-definitive element of choice that this act involved has remained in chapter 2 of the Rule of Clare. Speaking of women who wish to enter the monastery, it states: "Afterwards, once her hair has been cut off round her head and her secular clothes set aside, she may be permitted three tunics and a mantle. Thereafter, she may not go outside the monastery except for a reasonable, evident, and approved purpose." Nevertheless, tonsure and the donning of a religious habit are still not the veiling or consecration of nuns, which required the presence of the bishop. 59 What separates the two acts is the year of probation. In fact, for candidates received into the monastery before the legal age and already shorn of their hair, the year of novitiate did not exist: "However, when they reach the age required by law, they may make their profession clothed in the same way as the others." Prolonged living with the nuns was sufficient.

 $^{^{55}} LegCl~24$ –25. See also Bartoli, "Chiara d'Assisi," pp. 78–82, cited in n. 3 above.

⁵⁶LegCl 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁸ RCl II 12. In the critical edition of Becker, Godet and Matura, it is precisely stated that in the Rule of Hugolino 4 the act of entering into a monastery had a character definitively in contrast to the prescriptions of Clare that are recalled here. On the subject of the tension that this concept of claustration caused between the Poor Ladies and Pope Gregory IX, see C. Gennaro, "Il francescanesimo femminile nel XIII secolo," in RSLR 25 2 (1989): 273–74.

 $^{^{59}}RCl$ XI 9: "If a bishop has permission to offer Mass within the enclosure, either for the blessing of an abbess or for the consecration of one of the sisters as a nun or for any other reason..."

⁶⁰ Ibid., II 18.

It is necessary to observe that in the Rule of Clare there is no hint at the tonsure of candidates to be performed by ecclesiastical authority or by the brothers. On the contrary, the use of the grammatical ablative absolute, capillis tonsis in rotundum ("once her hair has been cut off round her head"), 61 and the impersonal construction tondeantur in rotundum ("cut round [their heads]"), 62 does not even allow us to determine whether it is the abbess who gives the tonsure.

Probably such an act is reduced in importance in order to emphasize the veiling, but we must not forget that it is precisely through this act that Clare began a religious penitential life, "willingly promising obedience to Francis together with [my] sisters."

Tonsure signaled her definitive choice of life, or as Celano would say, it was one of the matrimonial jewels with which she espoused herself forever to Christ.⁶⁴ But for Clare this gesture, in addition to its subsequent nuptial interpretation, signified the beginning of her conversion⁶⁵ and her life of penance (facere poenitentiam).⁶⁶

When read in this light, the initial perplexity of Sabatier loses its tenor. Francis, in concert with Clare, did not act against the existing canons, but with the tonsure and the religious habit he gave her that which she herself — like Filippa Mareri and other sisters and penitents of the time — would have been able to give herself, thereby entering into that category of penitents recognized by the church.

⁶¹ Ibid., II.

⁶² Ibid., II 17.

⁶³ Ibid., VI 1.

⁶⁴ See LegCl 8.

⁶⁵ In effect, in the *Testament*, Clare, going back to the beginnings, speaks twice of conversio. See vv. 8, 25.

⁶⁶ TestCl 24.